

TITLE: The Blind Men and the Elephant

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~~Confidential~~*Impressions of my DO*

## The Blind Men and the Elephant

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Recently, two of my colleagues tried to describe "their" Directorate of Operations (DO).\* Like the blind men in the fable, they accurately described only parts of the elephant. The complete beast that emerged from their description only imperfectly resembles the animal I knew and (usually) loved for 35 years.

Our emphasis and appreciation differ, but the reader will soon realize that we all are describing an extinct mastodon. The symptoms had not yet become apparent, but the DO in which we served fell into a terminal illness about 20 years ago. For roughly the first 20 years after its creation, the DO was largely a WASP preserve, dominated for much of that period by OSS veterans. The latter, mostly from the Ivy League, Easterners and Europe-oriented, monopolized all of the senior positions and played organizational musical chairs with each other. In the 1960s, the DO was led by East Asia specialists as the Agency concentrated on Vietnam. They in turn were replaced by NE specialists when the DO's focus shifted to the Arab-Israeli confrontation, terrorism, Lebanon, and Afghanistan.

Whatever the geographic affiliation of the DO leadership, the "barons" ran their divisions and Stations like feudal fiefs, and the serf who tried to move from one division to another, much less to another directorate, was labelled as "disloyal." For example, when a colleague I respected and admired decided to move temporarily from the DO to the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), a DO deputy division chief told him that his return would be highly unlikely. Moreover, if by some chance the DO was forgiving and gracious enough to welcome him back,

he would be so far behind his peers that he would never make up for the time "lost" in the DI. It was only some years later that what "lost" meant became apparent.

By then, he was chief of the largest branch in one of the largest and most important DO Stations. His branch was the most productive in the Station, in part because of the knowledge of the target he had acquired in the DI. (b)(1)

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Nevertheless,

he repeatedly was passed over for promotion. His COS, a senior baron not known for sensitivity to his subordinates, nonetheless became annoyed because his judgment was being challenged.

On a TDY to Headquarters, the COS asked the promotion panel to explain why his key branch chief was not being promoted. What they told him says a lot about the DO 20 years ago. First, the officer did not have his own "command." That is, he was not a COS like, for example, the Station chiefs in Africa, most of whom "commanded" minuscule Stations far smaller than his branch. And the incontestable fact that my colleague's branch produced intelligence of far greater interest and value to the US was, apparently, irrelevant. Second, he had spent a tour in the DI. As a result, the DO promotion panel "did not know where his loyalties lay...." This statement stunned even his baron, but by that time barons could no longer dictate promotions.

### Social Change

It was about this time, too, that the social composition of the DO slowly began to change. For most of the DO's history and until relatively recently, there

(b)(3)(c) "The In-Culture of the DO," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 23-28

(b)(3)(c) "The DO Culture: An Oxymoron?" *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Winter 1991, pp. 81-82.

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were few blacks, few "Hispanics" (as yet innocently unaware that they merited a separate designation) and almost no women among the case officer cadre. The one-legged lady who had parachuted over France during World War II was one of the few women "professionals" in the DO. We properly regarded her with reverential awe.

There were plenty of women in the dank, sloping halls of the temporary buildings below the Lincoln Memorial and later in Langley, but almost all were in the clerical category. In addition to "little old ladies in tennis shoes," the DO had some of the best-educated women in the country doing its filing and typing. Later, many women entered the professional door as reports officers, a function disdained by male case officers, who regarded "reports"—intelligence—as inferior and subordinate to action—operations. The inability of many case officers and their superiors to link operations to the production of intelligence remains to this day a consistent and puzzling manifestation of the DO "culture."

## A Military Flavor

One reason for the absence of female case officers was the semi-military nature of the DO, which is derived from its origins (OSS and the National Security Act of 1947) and reflected in its vocabulary: "officers," "line division," "command." There was a clear and simple chain of command from the DO to the division chiefs. (b)(3)(c)

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Part of the basic training was in fact paramilitary, including jump school sabotage; weapons familiarization; and exercises with explosives. No women took this training, just as there were no women in the combat arms of the military or cadets in the service academies. The lack of this training served to exclude women from "command" functions.

The geographic "line" divisions were the heart and soul of the DO. Several small staffs had always existed, but, as in the military, they were not in the chain of command, and ambitious case officers avoided assignments to them. They also avoided being assigned (b)(3)(c) as instructors and for the same reason: it too was out of

the chain of command and not involved in operations. It was understood that a tour on a staff or the "farm" was not "career enhancing." In fact, another consistent hallmark of DO "culture" has been the antipathy of most case officers to training, which they have seen as a waste of time or a pointless diversion.

Vocational training is still only reluctantly tolerated, but assignment to one of the large "centers" now is acceptable. These "centers"—contemporary, bloated versions of staffs, albeit with some operational responsibilities—drain case officer personnel, thereby contributing to their absence in the divisions and the (b)(3)(c) in the status and role of the (b)(3)(c) no longer the repository of profound area knowledge. Now they are largely staffed by women, most of whom are not case officers.

## Specialization and Cross-Fertilization

The extensive exchange of personnel among divisions is another recent phenomenon. Most case officers normally spent most if not all of their careers in the same division, thereby becoming Latin America "types," or European "types," or Near East "types." When one "type" referred derogatorily to another "type," he assumed, correctly, that his interlocutor would understand what was implied when someone was dismissed as "an NE type." As a result of this geographic compartmentation, the case officers in one division would know each other, at least by name, but it would not be unusual for European "types" to know few LA "types."

Besides breeding stagnation and insularity, this specialization also produced solid cultural, geographic and area knowledge. Once the barriers among divisions began to break down, however, this knowledge began to erode. "Cross-cultural fertilization"—an "in" phrase borrowed from cultural anthropology—made, it was thought, case officers "broad-gauged," a description dear to "hard-chargers" in the business world.

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Unfortunately, many of the broad-gauged-hard-chargers had only a thin veneer of area knowledge and often limited language ability. Case officers (and their managers) with real knowledge of their targets began to be in short supply. It remains to be demonstrated whether wider ignorance is more valuable to the DO than narrow expertise.

### Misplaced Mobility

The application of the mobility theory of management produced some bizarre assignments in the 1980s.

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In any case, geographical mobility, whatever its organizational and managerial virtues, diluted the sense of camaraderie in the DO. When most case officers served in the same division for most of their careers, they (and their spouses) knew each other, shared the same experiences, and developed a common view of the world and the DO mission.

### DO Elitism

For many years there was a familial feeling of membership in an elite unit. Underpaid, overworked, grumbling, cynical, and harassed, but nonetheless an elite: the intelligence praetorian guard. When case officers referred to "the Agency," they meant the DO, not any of the other directorates. They knew that the other directorates, theoretically at least, could just as easily be housed in some other government department. But not the DO, which was the essence of the Agency, its Clandestine Service, what made it different and special. And the case officers were its elite corps.

### A Darker Side

This elitism and pride were distinguished by an admirable spirit of discipline, sacrifice, and commitment. At the same time, however, there was a disdain for the other directorates and for intelligence as opposed to operations. Particular scorn was reserved for the Department of State, regarded as pusillanimous and an obstacle to "operations." This attitude was transferred to Congress when it began to inquire into the operations of "the Agency," meaning, again, the DO.

Congressional interest in the inner workings of the Agency was a new and to some a disturbing development. As a Deputy Director for Administration said many years after he retired, "I had no budget problems, no personnel problems, no Congressional problems. Things are different now." Indeed. To some old DO barons, unused to being challenged by anyone and often possessed of egos the size of Mt. Rushmore, this new situation was intolerable, and they did their best to evade it. Their younger successors are more malleable. They have accepted both Congressional oversight, and Congressional micromanagement.

### Bad Decisions

"Upper management" in the DO could not resist Congress, and it had no influence over the changed social composition or educational attainments of its employees. It did, however, make on its own two decisions which impaired DO expertise and morale. The first was the cluster of concepts that held that rapid turnover and exchange of personnel were for personal development and for the DO as an institution. These propositions are not necessarily identical. Allied to the dubious benefits of rapid turnover and short assignments was the related idea that a manager needed only to know how to manage; knowledge of the subject of his management was not required.

In the 1980s, these theories were routinely applied in the DO. As a result, the DI placed a number of its personnel in the DO, some in key positions formerly reserved for case officers. Other DI officers spent

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rotational tours in the DO, assignments which benefited their careers and probably the DI as well. In contrast, few DO officers sought or received assignments in the other directorates. Those who went or were sent were not regarded as "fast-trackers," and their tours in the DI were not "career enhancing".

The second decision, that DO personnel overseas should be paid overtime, was more insidious and in the long run perhaps more corrosive. This doubtless was a commendable attempt to find some legal way to compensate DO personnel, especially case officers, for long hours, slow promotions and inadequate pay. Whatever the reasoning, the psychological effect on the discipline and integrity of the case officer corps has been disastrous.

At one stroke, this decision removed the sense of dedication and sacrifice which distinguished an elite corps. Case officers became merely another category of *employees*, not intrinsically different from other categories. Moreover, the provision of pay for overtime produced dependence on a supplementary income, which in turn stimulated petty chiseling with accountings and a clock-punching mentality. Rescinding this decision would be difficult, perhaps impossible.

The DO is which my colleagues and I spent our adult lives is dead, killed by a variety of causes, some inevitable, others natural, still others self-inflicted. The institution which survives with the same name confronts new and in many ways more difficult challenges under largely unfavorable circumstances.

### **Some Recommendations**

So, as Vladyimir Ilyich once wrote, "What is to be done?" Plenty. Hire only against high standards and real needs, not quotas. Instill in new personnel a sense of ethics, duty, and discipline, not just rights and rewards. Cease mechanically transferring people in response to some abstract theory of personnel development. Develop and reward solid area

expertise. Establish a sabbatical program for outstanding operational personnel at a mid-career level. Assign DO case officers to rotational tours in the DI to improve their substantive knowledge and to give them a better appreciation of the intelligence process.

More. Discipline senior officers for operational blunders and mismanagement of resources and personnel. Control the cost of perks (cars, redecorating, servants) allowed senior Station managers. Consider eliminating bonuses to SIS personnel and distributing the monies instead to outstanding middle- and lower-grade personnel. Oblige SIS officers parked in lower-ranking positions to retire or be reduced in grade and pay.

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Some of these suggestions are obviously more important than others. Few, like a Brezhnev speech, will inspire "loud, prolonged applause, all rise." And none, simply or in combination, will resurrect the DO in the absence of inspired, inspirational and respected leadership. If the DO is to recapture a sense of mission and dedication, however, some of these steps have to be taken.

Without the Evil Empire, the threat to the US is no longer direct and the need for clandestine operations in the classical sense less demonstrable. DO leadership in the 1990s thus has a difficult task in the context of a completely new domestic and foreign environment. Although many of the new barons running the DO are far superior in experience and talent to their predecessors, success under these conditions will not come easily.

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